

PART I

Sacrificing to



Offering, Rejection, and Ritual

I

Sacrifice is the most primary and basic form of ritual. The elimination of animal sacrifice from contemporary Western religious life came about as a result of a cataclysmic moment. In Judaism, the ritual of sacrifice reached an abrupt end with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem during the first century. The alternatives to temple worship that emerged out of this crisis within rabbinic culture, though “sublimating” temple sacrifice, were to a certain degree modeled after the sacrifice, and kept its ethos and drive. Christianity replaced all sacrifices with one ultimate sacrificial event: the sacrifice of the son of God. That sacrifice eclipsed all previous ones, making them redundant and void.¹ Hence Christianity did not do away with the idea of sacrifice; it founded itself on the supreme sacrifice, which within the Catholic tradition is reenacted in the church’s ritual.

What is it about sacrifice that is so essential to human expression and life? I am not going to address this problem by investigating the origins of sacrifice. I

doubt the explanatory power of such speculation, since it arbitrarily assumes that the moment of origin, if there is such a thing, has a privileged position regarding either the meaning of a phenomenon or its endurance.² I wish to initiate my investigation with a different sort of beginning, a literal one—the first account of sacrifice within the biblical narrative. An attentive reading of the first sacrifices offered at the emergence of humanity by Cain and Abel, and the bloodshed that resulted from this foundational sacrificial moment, has a lot to teach us concerning the meaning, trauma, and violence in sacrifice.

Abel became a keeper of sheep, and Cain became a tiller of the soil. In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the Lord from the fruit of the soil. And Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. The Lord paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering He paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell. (Gen. 4:2–5)

The first biblical account of sacrifice has its source in spontaneous giving from the produce of each of the brothers to God. The story stresses the expectation of the giver that his sacrifice be accepted, and the utter devastation that results from its rejection. It seems that such anticipation aims at establishing a bond between the giver and receiver, in which the reception of the gift will establish the continuity of the flow of goods. The goal of the sacrifice is to produce a gift cycle. The tale

postulates an essential connection between rejection and sacrifice; the risk of rejection is inherent in the act of sacrifice. Why Cain's offering was refused is a mystery, and the different explanations that have been proposed in the scholarly literature are inadequate. The text itself does not provide any substantive reason. This silence is significant; it is essential to this form of rejection that it remains inexplicable, as if nothing could be done to either predict or overcome it.

The privileging of Abel and dismissal of Cain seem to be as mysterious as human love and endearment. This unpredictable nature of love turns into a theme that haunts the entire book of Genesis. Why does Rebecca love Jacob and Isaac love Esau—an arbitrary division of love that ends up tragically defining the brothers' lives? And to what moral or other features can we attribute Jacob's preference—which will turn fatal—for Joseph over and above his brothers? The evasiveness of charm and capriciousness of attraction are at the root of much of the tragic dimension of the Genesis story. This entanglement has its starting point in my narrative in the privileging of one brother's sacrifice over the other's.

The inherent potential for rejection in the sacrificial act is manifested in the Hebrew term for the offering: *minchah*. In later priestly literature, this word was used to denote a subset of offerings—that is, vegetative offerings. Animal offerings were designated by the term *korban*. Yet Genesis doesn't distinguish between the two kinds of sacrifices. Abel's offering from his flock and

Cain's offering from his fruits are both called *minchah*. The term *minchah* is related to the verb *lehaniach*, which means to lay down or put before. The term *korban* is related to the verb *lekarev*, meaning to bring forward, approach, or move closer.³

Both of these words are used in contrast to the common term for a gift, *matanah*, a noun related to the verb *latet*, which means to give. While *matanah* signifies a gift that has been immediately transferred from giver to receiver, the term *minchah* or *korban*—as something that is brought forward or laid before—indicates that it is the receiver who will decide whether to take it or not. (The verb “to offer” as distinct from “to give” captures the nuance in English.) In the shift from *matanah* to *minchah*, from giving to bringing forward, a crucial gap is established between giving and receiving. In the case of Cain's sacrifice, this separation became rather momentous, inasmuch as it connects sacrifice with trauma.

An important linguistic phenomenon in the biblical material supplies the key to understanding sacrifice. In biblical language, gifts given between equals or from a superior to an inferior are always designated by the noun *matanah* and verb *latet*, implying that no gap between giving and receiving exists. The gift is an actual transfer to the beneficiary's domain. Only in the gifts offered from an inferior to a superior is the term *minchah* utilized, to stress the fact that the superior has the privilege of rejecting the gift. The giver, by bringing forward or laying down, is merely presenting something before

the future beneficiary. His superior will take the next step, either to refuse or accept what was laid before him.

It is a mark of superiority that entry into the gift cycle is voluntary—an act of love rather than of duty. In his work on the gift, Marcel Mauss described the ethics of the gift as the obligation to receive and reciprocate.⁴ This is true in a fraternal relation, but not among inferiors and superiors.⁵ In the human-divine relationship, the divine privilege to reject is rooted in the fact that the sacrifice is actually an act of returning rather than giving. God is entitled, as the one who gave the produce in the first place, to refuse its return. The book of Deuteronomy articulates the expectation that pilgrims to the temple will bring a sacrifice: “And they shall not appear before God empty: every man shall give as he is able according to the blessing of God which he has given you” (Deut. 16:16–17). The one who brings a sacrifice gives to God what God has given to him. The sacrificial act is therefore a symbolic recycling of the gift to its origin.⁶

Two biblical vows, one by Jacob and another by Hannah, reflect the nature of an offering as the recycling of a gift and, through such recycling, the establishment of a gift cycle. When Jacob escaped from Esau, he pledged to make an offering if he returned home safely. The offering was formulated as follows: “And for all that You give me I will set aside a tithe for You” (Gen. 28:22). The tithe that Jacob vowed to offer to God is a return of a portion of what God would give him. Hannah’s promise is far more dramatic and momentous. Hannah, who had

been barren, made the following vow when praying for a child: “O Lord of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life” (I Sam. 1:11). She later bore a child and named him Samuel—a name interpreted to signify that the child has been borrowed from God, and that Hannah fulfilled her vow, bringing the child to the temple to reside there all his life and serve God. On leaving him there, she declared to the priest: “It was this boy I prayed for; and the Lord has granted me what I asked of Him. I, in turn, thereby lend him to the Lord. For as long as he lives he is lent to the Lord” (I Sam. 1:27).

Unlike Jacob, who vowed to return only a tithe, a symbolic portion to express and acknowledge the gift, Hannah made a full return. She dedicated to God the child that God had given her. In the recycling of the gift, a gift cycle had been established. When Hannah came to the temple to visit Samuel, her child, Eli the priest blessed both her and Elkana, her husband: “‘May the Lord grant you offspring by this woman in place of the loan she made to the Lord.’ . . . For the Lord took note of Hannah; she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters” (I Sam. 2:20–21). God gave Samuel, who was offered back to God, and in turn he granted more children to the barren Hannah. A complete gift bond was effected.⁷ Every offering is thus a return. The giver is permitted to use the rest of his property only after

making the sacrificial gesture, which implies his gratitude and recognition that his goods are a gift of God.⁸ Hence, the bringing of the first fruit to the temple allows the giver to consume the rest of the field for his purposes. He is just returning what he received, in the guise of giving.

The fact that the offering is given within such a hierarchical structure precludes the suspicion that it is a crude form of bribe or nourishment to God by the believer.⁹ A middle-class person cannot bribe a billionaire; he can bribe another middle-class person who might be slightly better off than he is. The gift of sacrifice to God, who is in the first place the provider of the good and in no need of it, functions as a token of submission and gratitude, and its reception is not driven by need or interest but rather is an expression of welcoming and goodwill. *Sacrifice is thus a gift given within a hierarchical context in which the ordinary obligation to receive and return is not valid. As such, a cycle of gift exchange is not necessarily established with the presentation of the offering, and a dangerous gap between giving and receiving is opened up, creating a potential for rejection and trauma.*

The centrality of the gift expressed by the term *minchah*, which described the first offering, sheds light on the diverse functions of sacrifice as a whole. W. Robertson Smith, who laid the foundation for the study of sacrifice in the Bible, divided its function into three: communion, gift, and expiation. Communion, which according to Smith is the primordial and privileged function of

sacrifice, is achieved through the shared consumption of the substance of the animal, thereby binding gods and humans with flesh-and-blood ties.¹⁰ The more secondary function, the gift, serves its role of feeding the gods, and is based on later developed notions of property and its transfer. Expiation, the third function, is the role of the sacrifice as absolving, which developed, claims Smith, in the context of an overwhelming sense of guilt and sin.

Smith's division parallels the three forms of sacrifice as articulated in Leviticus: the peace offering (*shelamim*), in which portions of the sacrifice are given from the altar to the person who brings it for consumption, serves to create a communion with God; the burnt offering (*olah*), which is completely consumed on the altar, functions as a pure gift; and the sin offering (*chattat*) is the expiatory sacrifice. Smith saw in this list a final priestly editing of a long developmental process. His trajectory of the process from communion to expiation was based on Julius Wellhausen's work, which dated the priestly material as the last stratum in scripture.¹¹

Regardless of the questionable accuracy of the chronological speculations, it appears that sacrifice within the biblical context is better understood through the gesture of the gift.¹² By way of the gift, communion can be divorced from the literal notion that God's altar and the offerer share the consumed animal. The acceptance of the sacrifice implies entry into the reciprocal gift cycle.¹³ Solidarity is defined by the borders of the gift cycle, and it is through this exchange that communion transpires.¹⁴

Atonement, as I will discuss later, can also be achieved through the gift, which assumes a substitute giving of the self. The gift, within the biblical tradition, is not one of the functions of sacrifice; it is the central category of sacrifice, but its meaning as a gift varies and is multilayered.¹⁵ In its essence as an offering as opposed to a gift, the sacrifice defies the common ethics of giving since its acceptance is not secured.

The fatal possibility of rejection gives rise to an important function of “ritual”: successful transfer. Ritual is a prescribed procedure meant to guarantee the transfer’s success. Adherence to detailed routine makes the passage from laying down to acceptance less fraught. *Ritual is thus a protocol that protects from the risk of rejection.* In that respect, ritual is analogous to legal systems as a whole insofar as they impose order while confronting the unreliability and capriciousness of emotional responses. It makes cooperation and the division of labor independent of the chaos of personal encounter; it is therefore an attempt to project a stable future.¹⁶

The ritual’s intricate rules serve as a shield for the human approaching God. Any change in the protocol might be lethal, like walking in a minefield. This shield comes at the expense of visibility. The one who is offering a sacrifice wishes to appear before God, to be made visible and join the gift cycle. And yet being in the spotlight before power can be terrifying. As in sending a complaint to the tax authorities, files might be opened, and the results are uncertain. In a negative

assessment of the presumed piety expressed in vowing, the Talmud states: “Whoever initiates a vow his record is examined” (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 1:1, 36:4). Vowing as a voluntary act of accepting an obligation (a demand beyond the norm) draws dangerous attention.¹⁷ It is no wonder that Job’s fall began the moment he was noticed, owing to God’s remark to Satan: “Have you noticed my servant Job? There is no one like him in all the earth” (Job 1:8). In his horror of visibility, Job yearns for anonymity and admonishes God for acting as humanity’s guardian: “Am I the sea or the Dragon that You have set a watch over me? . . . What is man, that You make much of him, that You fix Your attention upon him? You inspect him every minute. Will You not look away from me for a while, Let me be, till I swallow my spittle? If I have sinned, what have I done to You watcher of men? Why make of me Your target, and a burden to myself?” (Job 7:12–17).

Ritual as a protocol for an approach erases the individuation of the one who is approaching. Such a person is one among many who follow the routine, approaching under the canopy of the secure and recognizable. The acceptance of such a gift is not unique, but at least it is safe. It secures enough attention without drawing too much of it. It is a sign of religious intimacy that the pious test the borders of ritual, and hence approach without following the protocol. It is a mark of their religious standing that they appear before God without following the

strict procedure of entry. “Love undermines the order”: with intimacy, playfulness serves as a substitute for the protocol of access. Yet a wrongly presumed intimacy, as in the case of Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu, might be fatal. The brothers spontaneously brought forth an alien fire that was not commanded by God and were immediately put to death.

In the spontaneous sacrifice offered by Cain and Abel at humanity’s emergence, before there was any protocol, death resulted from the gift’s rejection. In the priestly material, though, the relationship between death and sacrifice is reversed. Nadav’s and Avihu’s deaths as a pivotal moment in establishing detailed ritual came about because of their attempt to act outside the protocol: “Now Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; they offered before the Lord alien fire, which he had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord” (Lev. 10:1–2). Their presumed attempt at offering occurred right after the initiation of the priests by Moses, and consecration of the tabernacle at the inauguration of the priestly ritual. Given this, the death of both signifies the protocol’s power and price of deviating from it after it has been established. It is no wonder that the most detailed rituals recorded in the priestly material—prescribing the way in which the high priest can safely approach the temple’s inner sanctum—were introduced

with reference to these traumatic deaths: “The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of the Lord. The Lord said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come at will into the shrine behind the curtain. In front of the cover that is upon the ark lest he dies; for I appear in the cloud over the cover. Thus only shall Aaron enter the shrine” (Lev. 16:1–2). The establishment of ritual as an effort to overcome the anxiety of rejection shifts the locus of danger from the gift’s refusal to false intimacy.

Ritual is an attempt to grapple with the inherent unpredictability of rejection. In order to smooth the passage from bringing forward to acceptance, practitioners tend to go a step further and endow ritual with magical powers. The magical reading of ritual introduces a causal dimension that closes the gap between giving and receiving, thereby ensuring acceptance of the gift and leaving nothing voluntary to the recipient. In that respect, the magical reading is the extreme opposite of intimacy. When the protocol is endowed with causal power, all personal elements are erased from the approach. We can imagine how shattering the prophetic corrective to such an urge was, when the prophets proclaimed that the whole structure of ritual—its daily forms, calendar, and detailed protocol—could turn abhorrent to the recipient—a burden that God might detest.¹⁸ Causation cannot replace desire.

II

René Girard, who has investigated the nexus of sacrifice and violence, contends that violence has an accelerating, uncontrolled nature. It escalates through sequels of retaliatory events. The aim of an animal or human sacrifice is to halt the unbridled spread of violence. Sacrifice thus serves a vital purification role. The violence performed on the sacrificial victim releases a violent anger on a target that is close to the actual subject of violence and yet far from tied to it. Thus one side is satisfied while the other side is not moved to retaliate.¹⁹ It is crucial, according to Girard, to choose a proper victim—one both near and far away enough to serve as a scapegoat. The failure to calibrate this may cause a sacrificial crisis. If the victim is too distant from the actual subject, it is useless to shift the rage. If the victim is too close, the subject will retaliate, and the sacrificial violence will not stop the cycle but rather contribute to its spread.

A proper understanding of Cain's and Abel's sacrifices provides an alternative to Girard's account concerning the nexus between violence and sacrifice. The source of violence is in the rejection from the sacrificial bond, the exclusion from the gift cycle. Because Cain's gift was refused, he was excluded from the most meaningful bond. He brought forward his gift, thus showing his desire to take part, and was slapped in the face, annihilated. It is far worse to have one's gift rejected than to fail to receive

a gift. When someone receives a gift while another person does not, the latter person is excluded from a cycle to which he did not display any initial desire to belong. The rejection of a gift, on the other hand, is a harsher form of exclusion. It is an utter dismissal, not only a form of ignoring. Cain asserted his presence through an act of violence. He destroyed the bond that he was excluded from and then made his weight felt again. The response to rejection from the cycle of bounty, to marginalization from what constitutes being itself, might be the deepest element in violence. The first murder was not only motivated by jealousy; it came from an acute response to banishment and isolation. *The exclusion from the possibility of giving is a deeper source of violence than the deprivation that results from not getting.*

Forced barrenness stands at the source of violence. The exclusion of a person from the cycle of giving is a thorough humiliation. It diminishes him from the effectiveness of giving and weight of contributing.²⁰ Assigning a person exclusively to the receiving end dooms him to passive receptivity and dependency, depriving him of the expression of love. When a child does not reciprocate his parent's love, the parent is less devastated than if the child refuses to receive his gift and rejects altogether the goods that the parent wishes to bestow on him. Because the capacity to give is so profoundly human, its denial might turn into violence.

It is no wonder, then, that the liturgical and scriptural language surrounding the sacrifice is loaded with refer-

ences to hopes and promises of desire.²¹ The other side of the dark fear of rejection is the expectation that the gift will be pleasing and desirable. As a testimony to this fear, sacrifices can become like gifts that not only are unreciprocated but also merely accumulate and become a burden, or like letters that are not only ignored but never opened as well. Each of these gifts and letters is another proof of the giver's annihilation.

Cain's punishment was proper and accurate, a kind of perfect retribution. He was not executed but rather excluded forever. He was cast away, forced to wander: "Cain left the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden" (Gen. 4:16). His initial sacrifice from the fruits that he grew was meant to ensure the continuation of that bounty; he wished to return the fruits he was given in order to get more of them, thereby fueling that crucial process. Cain was punished: "If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth" (Gen. 4:12). The land—Cain's source of bounty and life—will turn barren.

Instead of approaching God with another sacrifice, Cain killed his brother. This time, the entity on the receiving end is the earth that took in the brother's blood: "Therefore you shall be cursed from the earth, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand" (Gen. 4:11).²² There will be no return from what might be described as a perverse blood gift; barrenness and wandering are the only outcomes of a futile